

automaticity

partner

brown bear

*fluency*  
*instruction*



# fluency instruction

Fluency is the ability to read a text accurately and quickly. When fluent readers read silently, they recognize words automatically. They group words quickly to help them gain meaning from what they read. Fluent readers read aloud effortlessly and with expression. Their reading sounds natural, as if they are speaking. Readers who have not yet developed fluency read slowly, word by word. Their oral reading is choppy and plodding.

Fluency is important because it provides a bridge between word recognition and comprehension. Because fluent readers do not have to concentrate on decoding the words, they can focus their attention on what the text means. They can make connections among the ideas in the text and between the text and their background knowledge. In other words, fluent readers recognize words and comprehend at the same time. Less fluent readers, however, must focus their attention on figuring out the words, leaving them little attention for understanding the text.

## *More fluent readers*

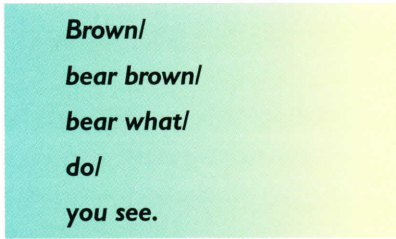
focus their attention on making connections among the ideas in a text and between these ideas and their background knowledge. Therefore, they are able to focus on comprehension.

## *Less fluent readers*

must focus their attention primarily on decoding individual words. Therefore, they have little attention left for comprehending the text.

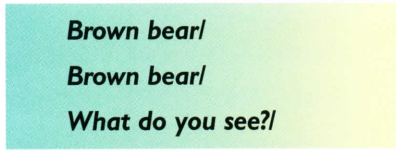
Fluency develops gradually over considerable time and through substantial practice. At the earliest stage of reading development, students' oral reading is slow and labored because students are just learning to "break the code"—to attach sounds to letters and to blend letter sounds into recognizable words.

Even when students recognize many words automatically, their oral reading still may be expressionless, not fluent. To read with expression, readers must be able to divide the text into meaningful chunks. These chunks include phrases and clauses. Readers must know to pause appropriately within and at the ends of sentences and when to change emphasis and tone. For example, a reader who lacks fluency may read, probably in a monotone, a line from Bill Martin Jr.'s *Brown Bear, Brown Bear* as if it were a list of words rather than a connected text, pausing at inappropriate places:



**Brown/  
bear brown/  
bear what/  
do/  
you see.**

A fluent reader will read the same line as:



**Brown bear!  
Brown bear!  
What do you see?!**

Fluency is not a stage of development at which readers can read all words quickly and easily. Fluency changes, depending on what readers are reading, their familiarity with the words, and the amount of their practice with reading text. Even very skilled readers may read in a slow, labored manner when reading texts with many unfamiliar words or topics. For example, readers who are usually fluent may not be able to read technical material fluently, such as a textbook about nuclear physics or an article in a medical journal.

A recent large-scale study by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) found that 44% of a representative sample of the nation's fourth graders were low in fluency. The study also found a close relationship between fluency and reading comprehension. Students who scored lower on measures of fluency also scored lower on measures of comprehension, suggesting that fluency is a neglected reading skill in many American classrooms, affecting many students' reading comprehension.

Although some readers may recognize words automatically in isolation or on a list, they may not read the same words fluently when the words appear in sentences in connected text. Instant or automatic word recognition is a necessary, but not sufficient, reading skill. Students who can read words in isolation quickly may not be able to automatically transfer this "speed and accuracy." It is important to provide students with instruction and practice in fluency as they read connected text.

## *What does scientifically based research tell us about fluency instruction?*

Researchers have investigated two major instructional approaches related to fluency. In the first approach, repeated and monitored oral reading (commonly called "repeated reading"), students read passages aloud several times and receive guidance and feedback from the teacher. In the second approach, independent silent reading, students are encouraged to read extensively on their own. Key findings from the scientific research on fluency instruction include the following conclusions about these two approaches that are of particular interest and value to classroom teachers.

### ***Repeated and monitored oral reading improves reading fluency and overall reading achievement.***

Students who read and reread passages orally as they receive guidance and/or feedback become better readers. Repeated oral reading substantially improves word recognition, speed, and accuracy as well as fluency. To a lesser but still considerable extent, repeated oral reading also improves reading comprehension. Repeated oral reading improves the reading ability of all students throughout the elementary school years. It also helps struggling readers at higher grade levels.

Traditionally, many teachers have relied primarily on round-robin reading to develop oral fluency. In round-robin reading, students take turns reading parts of a text aloud (though usually not repeatedly). But round-robin reading in itself does not increase fluency. This may be because students only read small amounts of text, and they usually read this small portion only once.

Researchers have found several effective techniques related to repeated oral reading:

- students read and reread a text a certain number of times or until a certain level of fluency is reached. Four rereadings are sufficient for most students; and
- oral reading practice is increased through the use of audiotapes, tutors, peer guidance, or other means.

In addition, some effective repeated oral reading techniques have carefully designed feedback to guide the reader's performance.

### ***The difference between fluency and automaticity***

Although the terms automaticity and fluency often are used interchangeably, they are not the same thing.

Automaticity is the fast, effortless word recognition that comes with a great deal of reading practice. In the early stages of learning to read, readers may be accurate but slow and inefficient at recognizing words. Continued reading practice helps word recognition become more automatic, rapid, and effortless. Automaticity refers only to accurate, speedy word recognition, not to reading with expression. Therefore, automaticity (or automatic word recognition) is necessary, but not sufficient, for fluency.



***No research evidence is available currently to confirm that instructional time spent on silent, independent reading with minimal guidance and feedback improves reading fluency and overall reading achievement.***

One of the major differences between good and poor readers is the amount of time they spend reading. Many studies have found a strong relationship between reading ability and how much a student reads. On the basis of this evidence, teachers have long been encouraged to promote voluntary reading in the classroom. Teacher-education and reading-education literature often recommends in-class procedures for encouraging students to read on their own, such as Silent Sustained Reading (SSR) or Drop Everything and Read (DEAR).

Research, however, has not yet confirmed whether independent silent reading with minimal guidance or feedback improves reading achievement and fluency. Neither has it proven that more silent reading in the classroom cannot work; its effectiveness without guidance or feedback is as yet unproven. The research suggests that there are more beneficial ways to spend reading instructional time than to have students read independently in the classroom without reading instruction.

# Questions you may have about fluency instruction

## How can I help my students become more fluent readers?

You can help your students become more fluent readers (1) by providing them with models of fluent reading and (2) by having students repeatedly read passages as you offer guidance. In addition, you can help students improve their fluency by combining reading instruction with opportunities for them to read books that are at their independent level of reading ability.

### **Model fluent reading, then have students reread the text on their own.**

By listening to good models of fluent reading, students learn how a reader's voice can help written text make sense. Read aloud daily to your students. By reading effortlessly and with expression, you are modeling for your students how a fluent reader sounds during reading.

After you model how to read the text, you must have the students reread it. By doing this, the students are engaging in repeated reading. Usually, having students read a text four times is sufficient to improve fluency. Remember, however, that instructional time is limited, and it is the actual time that students are actively engaged in reading that produces reading gains.

Have other adults read aloud to students. Encourage parents or other family members to read aloud to their children at home. The more models of fluent reading the children hear, the better. Of course, hearing a model of fluent reading is not the only benefit of reading aloud to children. Reading to children also increases their knowledge of the world, their vocabulary, their familiarity with written language ("book language"), and their interest in reading.

**Have students repeatedly read passages aloud with guidance.** The best strategy for developing reading fluency is to provide your students with many opportunities to read the same passage orally several times. To do this, you should first know what to have your students read. Second, you should know how to have your students read aloud repeatedly.

### **Modeling fluent reading**

In the primary grades, you might read aloud from a big book. A big book is an enlarged version of a commercially published book—big enough so that all students can clearly see the text. By pointing to each word as you are reading (using either a pointer or your finger), you can show students where and how you are pausing and how the text shows you when to raise or lower your voice. Occasionally, you can also explain to your students why you are reading in a certain way:

*Teacher: Did you hear how I grouped the words "Brown bear/ brown bear"?*

*That's because the words brown and bear belong together.*

*And then I paused a little before repeating the words.*

*Teacher: Did you hear how my voice got louder and more excited right here?*

*That's because the author put in this exclamation mark (point to it) to show that the speaker was excited or enthusiastic about what she was saying.*

Then, have the students practice reading the same text.

### *Independent level text*

Relatively easy text for the reader, with no more than approximately 1 in 20 words difficult for the reader (95% success)

### *Instructional level text*

Challenging but manageable text for the reader, with no more than approximately 1 in 10 words difficult for the reader (90% success)

### *Frustration level text*

Difficult text for the reader, with more than 1 in 10 words difficult for the reader (less than 90% success)

**What students should read.** Fluency develops as a result of many opportunities to practice reading with a high degree of success. Therefore, your students should practice orally rereading text that is reasonably easy for them—that is, text containing mostly words that they know or can decode easily. In other words, the texts should be at the students' independent reading level. A text is at students' independent reading level if they can read it with about 95% accuracy, or misread only about 1 of every 20 words. If the text is more difficult, students will focus so much on word recognition that they will not have an opportunity to develop fluency.

The text your students practice rereading orally should also be relatively short—probably 50–200 words, depending on the age of the students. You should also use a variety of reading materials, including stories, nonfiction, and poetry. Poetry is especially well suited to fluency practice because poems for children are often short and they contain rhythm, rhyme, and meaning, making practice easy, fun, and rewarding.

**How to have your students read aloud repeatedly.** There are several ways that your students can practice orally rereading text, including student-adult reading, choral (or unison) reading, tape-assisted reading, partner reading, and readers' theatre.

**Student-adult reading.** In student-adult reading, the student reads one-on-one with an adult. The adult can be you, a parent, a classroom aide, or a tutor. The adult reads the text first, providing the students with a model of fluent reading. Then the student reads the same passage to the adult with the adult providing assistance and encouragement. The student rereads the passage until the reading is quite fluent. This should take approximately three to four rereadings.

**Choral reading.** In choral, or unison, reading, students read along as a group with you (or another fluent adult reader). Of course, to do so, students must be able to see the same text that you are reading. They might follow along as you read from a big book, or they might read from their own copy of the book you are reading. For choral reading, choose a book that is not too long and that you think is at the independent reading level of most students. Patterned or predictable books are particularly useful for choral reading, because their repetitious style invites students to join in. Begin by reading the book aloud as you model fluent reading.

Then reread the book and invite students to join in as they recognize the words you are reading. Continue rereading the book, encouraging students to read along as they are able. Students should read the book with you three to five times total (though not necessarily on the same day). At this time, students should be able to read the text independently.

**Tape-assisted reading.** In tape-assisted reading, students read along in their books as they hear a fluent reader read the book on an audiotape. For tape-assisted reading, you need a book at a student's independent reading level and a tape recording of the book read by a fluent reader at about 80–100 words per minute. The tape should not have sound effects or music. For the first reading, the student should follow along with the tape, pointing to each word in her or his book as the reader reads it. Next, the student should try to read aloud along with the tape. Reading along with the tape should continue until the student is able to read the book independently, without the support of the tape.

**Partner reading.** In partner reading, paired students take turns reading aloud to each other. For partner reading, more fluent readers can be paired with less fluent readers. The stronger reader reads a paragraph or page first, providing a model of fluent reading. Then the less fluent reader reads the same text aloud. The stronger student gives help with word recognition and provides feedback and encouragement to the less fluent partner. The less fluent partner rereads the passage until he or she can read it independently. Partner reading need not be done with a more and less fluent reader. In another form of partner reading, children who read at the same level are paired to reread a story that they have received instruction on during a teacher-guided part of the lesson. Two readers of equal ability can practice rereading after hearing the teacher read the passage.

### Activities for repeated oral reading practice

**Student–adult reading**—reading one-on-one with an adult, who provides a model of fluent reading, helps with word recognition, and offers feedback.

**Choral reading**—reading aloud simultaneously in a group.

**Tape-assisted reading**—reading aloud simultaneously or as an echo with an audio-taped model.

**Partner reading**—reading aloud with a more fluent partner (or with a partner of equal ability) who provides a model of fluent reading, helps with word recognition, and provides feedback.

**Readers' theatre**—the rehearsing and performing before an audience of a dialogue-rich script derived from a book.



*Procedure for calculating words correct per minute*  
*One-minute reading: Total words read-errors = words correct per minute*

1. Select two or three brief passages from a grade-level basal text or other grade-level material (regardless of students' instructional levels).
2. Have individual students read each passage aloud for exactly one minute.
3. Count the total number of words the student read for each passage. Compute the average number of words read per minute.
4. Count the number of errors the student made on each passage. Compute the average number of errors per minute.
5. Subtract the average number of errors read per minute from the average total number of words read per minute. The result is the average number of words correct per minute (WCPM).
6. Repeat the procedure several times during the year. Graphing students' WCPM throughout the year easily captures their reading growth.
7. Compare the results with published norms or standards to determine whether students are making suitable progress in their fluency. For example, according to one published norm, students should be reading approximately 60 words per minute correctly by the end of first grade, 90–100 words per minute correctly by the end of second grade, and approximately 114 words per minute correctly by the end of third grade.

**Readers' theatre.** In readers' theatre, students rehearse and perform a play for peers or others. They read from scripts that have been derived from books that are rich in dialogue. Students play characters who speak lines or a narrator who shares necessary background information. Readers' theatre provides readers with a legitimate reason to reread text and to practice fluency. Readers' theatre also promotes cooperative interaction with peers and makes the reading task appealing.

### **What should I do about silent, independent reading in the classroom?**

Reading fluency growth is greatest when students are working directly with you. Therefore, you should use most of your allocated reading instruction time for direct teaching of reading skills and strategies. Although silent, independent reading may be a way to increase fluency and reading achievement, it should not be used in place of direct instruction in reading.

Direct instruction is especially important for readers who are struggling. Readers who have not yet attained fluency are not likely to make effective and efficient use of silent, independent reading time. For these students, independent reading takes time away from needed reading instruction.

Rather than allocating instructional time for independent reading in the classroom, encourage your students to read more outside of school. They can read with an adult or other family member. Or, they can read on their own with books at their independent reading level. Of course, students might also read on their own during independent work time in the classroom—for example, as another small group is receiving reading instruction, or after they have completed one activity and are waiting for a new activity to begin.

## When should fluency instruction begin? When should it end?

Fluency instruction is useful when students are not automatic at recognizing the words in their texts. How can you tell when students are not automatic? There is a strong indication that a student needs fluency instruction:

- if you ask the student to read orally from a text that he or she has not practiced; and the student makes more than ten percent word recognition errors;
- if the student cannot read orally with expression; or
- if the student's comprehension is poor for the text that she or he reads orally.

## Is increasing word recognition skills sufficient for developing fluency?

Isolated word recognition is a necessary but not sufficient condition for fluent reading. Throughout much of the twentieth century, it was widely assumed that fluency was the result of word recognition proficiency. Instruction, therefore, focused primarily on the development of word recognition. In recent years, however, research has shown that fluency is a separate component of reading that can be developed through instruction.

Having students review and rehearse word lists (for example, by using flash cards) may improve their ability to recognize the words in isolation, but this ability may not transfer to words presented in actual texts. Developing reading fluency in texts must be developed systematically.

## Should I assess fluency? If so, how?

You should formally and informally assess fluency regularly to ensure that your students are making appropriate progress. The most informal assessment is simply listening to students read aloud and making a judgment about their progress in fluency. You should, however, also include more formal measures of fluency. For example, the student's reading rate should be faster than 90 words a minute, the student should be able to read orally with expression, and the student should be able to comprehend what is read while reading orally.

Probably the easiest way to formally assess fluency is to take timed samples of students' reading and to compare their performance (number of words read correctly per minute) with published oral reading fluency norms or standards.

Monitoring your students' progress in reading fluency will help you determine the effectiveness of your instruction and set instructional goals. Also, seeing their fluency growth reflected in the graphs you keep can motivate students.

Other procedures that have been used for measuring fluency include Informal Reading Inventories (IRIs), miscue analysis, and running records. The purpose of these procedures, however, is to identify the kinds of word recognition problems students may have, not to measure fluency. Also, these procedures are quite time-consuming. Simpler measures of speed and accuracy, such as calculating words read correctly per minute, are more appropriate for monitoring fluency.

## Summing up

### **Fluency is**

- the ability to read a text accurately and quickly.

### **Fluency is important because**

- it frees students to understand what they read.

### **Reading fluency can be developed**

- by modeling fluent reading
- by having students engage in repeated oral reading.

### **Monitoring student progress in reading fluency**

- is useful in evaluating instruction and setting instructional goals
- can be motivating to students.



